Implicit Causality and Explicit Consequentiality

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In the study of sentence processing, Implicit Causality (IC) and Consequentiality (ICons) biases have enjoyed significant attention as expectation-based phenomena (a.o. Garvey & Caramazza 1974, Brown & Fish 1983, Koornneef & van Berkum 2006, Pykkönen & Järvinen 2010, Bott & Solstad 2014, Garnham et al. 2020). Language production research has found a ‘mirror bias’ for a number of the involved verb classes, e.g. stimulus-experiencer (annoy) and experiencer-stimulus (admire) verbs. Thus, causality prompts (because) display a stimulus bias, whereas consequentiality prompts (so (that)) display an experiencer bias (Crinean & Garnham 2006, Hartshorne et al. 2015). Consequently, Crinean & Garnham (2006), Pickering & Majid (2006), and Hartshorne et al. (2015) argued for a Causal Symmetry Hypothesis: What triggers the IC bias, should also be responsible for ICons, causes and consequences being part of one relation. Although Crinean & Garnham (2006) as well as Hartshorne et al. (2015) are ‘verb-based accounts’ and Pickering & Majid (2006) is based on world knowledge, they share the prediction that causes and consequences should be equally available.

In our talk, we will argue for the Causal Asymmetry Hypothesis instead, and propose that different mechanisms apply to IC and ICons. For IC, verb semantics triggers causal specifications, involving a contingency relation with an underspecified cause (i.e., what is it about John that annoys Mary?; Hartshorne & Snedeker 2013, Bott & Solstad, 2014, Bott & Solstad, to appear). We assume no parallel mechanism for consequences, as the effect is already specified in the verb (i.e., annoying causes being annoyed).

Evidence for the Causal Asymmetry Hypothesis will be presented from three written production studies. This set of experiments directly contrasts IC and ICons, showing that the two discourse biases are in fact very different from each other once we look beyond coreference into discourse structure.

References:
Bott/Solstad (2014): From verbs to discourse: A Novel Account of Implicit Causality. In Hemforth et al. (eds.): Psycholinguistic approaches to meaning and understanding across languages.